

Written By Former Eldorado Hotshot Superintendent: Aaron Humphrey
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Mental Health and Being a Hotshot - From Aaron Humphrey, Eldorado Hotshot Superintendent (for four more days). Best of luck to you and your family Hump. Your family and life outside the business is your legacy. Thanks for your years as a hotshot and all you have done for so many of us. And thanks for putting the same thoughts many of us have had into words.

I have a few things to say before I go. I have always believed Hotshots to be at the front of a learning culture, so I decided to talk about some things I know most of us experience. You might not of and many will not see things the same as I did, just know I'm putting it all out there so maybe it helps someone.

I don't have to tell any of you what being a Hotshot means. I could go on and on. So much good. Everything is earned and learned through pain, hard work and teamwork. Being part of the solution to some of the hardest and most complex problems that are not comparable to many professions. I am proud of being a Hotshot and having worked from the bottom to the top of a crew.

I do believe it is the best job in the world. It has molded and pushed me. I was drifting in and out of what I wanted to do early in life. I was a temp working on engines and driving my parents crazy with my lack of direction and honestly I would fire my former self. Many times. Then I got a job on the Eldorado IHC and yes it was because of my Dad.(I still don't know if my Dad was expecting what happened or just wanted me to get my butt whooped

I almost quit the first week of being a hotshot.

The pain I felt and the realization that it was going to get harder. I was soft and insecure, I was lazy. My parents did not raise me like that, I just was. I woke up at the end of the first week feeling physical pain I had never felt in my life. I almost walked away. The only reason I did not was my Dad. Although I am sure he saw and heard the dumb stuff I was doing he put his name on the line for me to get a job on the crew. That moment changed everything in my life. We all have many paths we follow and stray sometimes. But the feeling of knowing how disappointed my Dad would be changed me.

As the season and years went by I found the structure, cohesion and teamwork was what I needed in my life. The relationships with crew members are indescribable. The moment you realize that the team is more important than the individual and everyone needs to bring forward their best to help the team. That on any given day someone will need you to pick them up because today is not their day. Knowing your turn is coming to be the one in need of being picked up. It felt special and I knew then what I wanted to do with my life. The feeling of pride to wear your crew shirt and to know what you went through to earn the salt stains and stench. Looking around the crew and fire camp and seeing the long stares and limps. The people scratching their oak and the others who manage to have a gift to take naps anywhere, anytime.

The longer you do this job, especially being a Hotshot (or IMT member) ensures you will be involved in or will be affected by fatalities or serious injuries. The amount of shifts, miles driven

and hiked under burning trees and rolling rocks. You have your crew to talk to and work with. To drink with and to cry with. But when it directly is one of you it is like a family member. As a crew member you ask the why's and tell yourself it won't happen to you. As a supervisor you live with it every day and every night. The more you take on without realizing all of the impacts each incident has the longer you stay in the redline (meaning maxed out). Each incident adding up.

Putting the crews needs first is much needed but comes with a price. I did not do a good job of taking care of myself. I have done a terrible job of taking care of my family. I always said the right things but I didn't truly live them. I won't go into details because I do not want to bring back memories for some and I also do not know how to write about them.

But every incident adds up. The stress is real. I felt like I needed to leave everything at work. I thought I was protecting my wife by not talking about things that I needed to talk about. Then when I did talk to her I didn't go about it right and would get angry that it didn't go over exactly as I wanted. I talked to my captains and crew a lot but at the same time you can only say so much. They all have their own lives and experiences and as humans we all deal with things in our own way. I talk at length about human factors and stress. Knowing yourself and how you respond to things. The truth is you can't leave work at work and home at home. In this job they are intermixed. As you get older you change mentally and physically and in this job that is multiplied exponentially.

Our crew has been through some tough times. I'm not trying to compare or pull the sympathy card. I just want you guys who haven't gotten to the point I did to not make my same mistakes. I should of talked to my wife much earlier. I should of talked to a professional much sooner. There are scenes that loop through my head day and night, smells of burning flesh and sounds. Mostly screams of pain and replaying emergency traffic conversations. Being part of a team and then supervising them comes with a lot of guilt. When you have to call a family that their son or daughter is injured or in the burn unit. Facing the crew and living with decisions you made that will be second guessed and picked apart. But they need to, to learn from it. Seeing the families of your crew member in ICU or worse the families of other crews at memorials and funerals.

We have all hugged and cried together, we have talked and we have had peer support and CISM. It helps and the agency has done a lot of positive in this avenue. But for me the feelings and emotions come back after something triggers it. Sometimes just fatigue as the summer grind moves on each year. I become something and someone I do not intent to be. All I can do is think of my family when I am on assignment. But then I am so tired or busy I don't have quality conversations we all need when we talk. When I'm home especially as the season progresses I am more distant and I never realized how angry I was. I was an asshole to my family. I have heard that they missed me but dreaded me actually coming home. Because I would be a complete jerk. This is real, this is how my family felt and I did this to the ones I preached to everyone else should be their priority.

I was on a bad path mentally. Then our fire seasons really started throwing havoc and destruction at us. For me the LNU fires then the big Napa fires really added a new level I wouldn't come

back from fully. The destruction over and over and the civilians who we couldn't help and looking to us but more so the firefighting itself. The amount of resources being poured into these fires with little wildland training and the lack of span of control. Our jobs changed to essentially going around and making sure other resources aren't going to burn anyone in, or kill themselves or anyone else. I am not knocking any agency or teams. I think they did what they could overall managing what truly is beyond worst case scenarios.

Then the Carr fire happened. For me that was the end of this job as I know it. I believe the years of not talking about the past and trying to take care of everyone else got me.

The day the fire tornado came and everyone did the best they could I lost the mental fight. I can't describe it in words but from that moment on I was different. I became someone I don't recognize and pretended a lot. I can't really put into words what I felt like. For the first time in my career I considered just driving the crew home. I thought about quitting. The past incidents and guilt and sorrow all hit me at once. I felt dead inside that night. I wanted my wife and family and a different life. Instead I sucked it up and was there for the crew and we marched forward and handled business. By not being able to correctly express what I had felt and how bad it was actually distanced me from my family more. I became an even worse husband and father. I feel like I was leading multiple lives. I needed real help. Not just talking to friends and drinking. Professional help.

Our crew went through a few things that fall involving a temp and hospitalization. The final straw. It was another family and more questions and guilt. The crew was done mentally after this event. Then the Camp fire started, I felt anger and guilt for not going. But I couldn't mentally and I knew it. I should have been working on my relationship with my wife and family but I spent time being angry and making things worse. Heavy drinking and depression. Overall unhealthy lifestyle, comfort food and no sleep.

When your mind is trying to fix itself and you are trying to find out who you are and what you need you can't lead a hotshot crew. You end up making mistakes and missing things you wouldn't normally. In this job we know what happens. My crew made our fire season a success last season. I finally had real conversations about personal stuff and honest struggles with them. They supported me and I will always be forever grateful. The entire 2019 crew and especially all the perms. You can't take on everything yourself, you have to have people for you. You can still support the crew while they support you. I found this out to late.

My wife and I have done counseling and I know it's not for everyone. You have to find the right person (counselor) and be open to it, I never was previously. But honestly it has been really helpful and impactful on my life. Honest hard truths, and I am still learning how to talk to her. I still suck at it mostly. I can't express enough that talking to your wife or loved ones HAS to happen. I screwed this up so bad. I shut out the person who loved me the most and thought I was doing something for her. This was the exact opposite of what was reality in my relationship. Finding the time to do things together and make sure they feel appreciated and loved.

The past couple years my wife worked really hard and opened a business here in Folsom. She did this with the hopes to help the family finances and so I could get into a job where I could be

home more with less stress and danger. Things haven't gone as planned and she has battled to stay open. The current virus might of done her in for good but we will see, she continues to find ways. I never budged in my career, I was a Hotshot. I did most things because that's what I wanted for a career. I believed in it as much as humanly possible. While doing that I lost sight of everything I preached. Family first. I didn't do that, I took it for granted. I couldn't manage both lives properly and in a healthy manner. Our loved ones sacrifice so much for us and with how busy we are it's easy to not see that. Take the time to actually see what they do and sacrifice.

I pictured being a Hotshot longer. I pictured retiring from the FS. This was not a decision I took lightly but it is right for me and my family. The minute I took it I have felt more like myself than I have in a long time.

The job I took keeps me local. I will be home way more and still be going outside and to some incidents. It has financial security and a real relationship with my family. Some of you can do this as a hotshot and I applaud you for it.

I look at the ages of my kids (10,9,7) and I don't have many years left before they are out of the house. The last 20 years on Eldo has flown by, I imagine these next ones will also.

There has been more great moments in my career than the bad ones. But the bad ones if not dealt with and worked on will consume you and sink you eventually. It caught up to me because I took on too much and never asked for help. I have been blessed to know all of you. It has been an honor and I hope this helps someone.

I know this bounced all over. Got a lot on my mind right now. It's a weird feeling when the job you love gets filled by someone else! I love this job and group. I am not in any way trying to whine or talk people out of wanting to be a Hotshot. I am a believer in sharing things that I have been through and learned from. No matter how personal. We can tell all the funny and war stories over a beer sometime. Mental health issues are real and I'm lucky to have the family and friends I do. Remember you're not alone and talking to the right people helps.

Hit me up anytime and feel free to send this to anyone who might find value in it.